

ART COMMISSION.

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LETTER  
OF  
THE SECRETARY OF WAR,  
COMMUNICATING,

*In compliance with a resolution of the House, the report of the art commission.*

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MARCH 9, 1860.—Laid upon the table, and ordered to be printed.

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WAR DEPARTMENT, *March 7, 1860.*

SIR: I have received from the Secretary of the Interior the resolution of the House of Representatives of the 2d instant, calling upon that officer to communicate "the report of the art commissioners, and the accompanying documents, made to the President of the United States;" and, in compliance with the request contained in that resolution, I have the honor to transmit herewith a copy of the paper referred to.

No documents accompanied the report.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JOHN B. FLOYD,  
*Secretary of War.*

HON. WILLIAM PENNINGTON,  
*Speaker of the House of Representatives.*

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REPORT OF UNITED STATES ART COMMISSION.

OFFICE OF UNITED STATES ART COMMISSION,  
*Washington, February 22, 1860.*

SIR: The United States art commission, authorized by acts of Congress of June 12, 1858, and March 3, 1859, and appointed by the President May 15, 1859, met and organized the 15th of June following, and subsequently made their preparatory survey of the public buildings and grounds at the seat of government, for the purpose of maturing a general plan of action for carrying out the work intrusted to their charge. For the furtherance of this object they beg leave to submit the following report upon the system of decoration heretofore adopted in those buildings, and to recommend such plan for their future art decoration and embellishment as will, in their opinion, best secure a harmonious result.

The erection of a great national capitol seldom occurs but once in the life of a nation. The opportunity such an event affords is an important one for the expression of patriotic devotion, and the per-

petuation, through the arts of painting and sculpture, of that which is high and noble and held in reverence by the people; and it becomes them, as patriots, to see to it that no taint of falsity is suffered to be transmitted to the future upon the escutcheon of our national honor in its artistic record. A theme so noble and worthy should interest the heart of the whole country, and whether patriot, statesman, or artist, one impulse should govern the whole in dedicating these buildings and grounds to the national honor.

It is presumed to be the wish of government not only to decorate their present buildings in the best possible manner, but to use the opportunity which the occasion affords to protect and develop national art. If there is to be any discrimination between native and foreign artists, the preference should be given to citizens. And our national history, in its application to the decoration of the public buildings, should take precedence of all other subjects.

If this assumption be correct, the money expended by government for the last five or six years for this purpose has been misapplied, with the exception of commissions like those awarded to Crawford and Rogers; for we find but little else which relates to our history, or in which the American mind will ever be interested. The arts afford a strong bond of national sympathy, and when they shall have fulfilled their mission here by giving expression to subjects of national interest, in which the several States shall have been represented, it will be a crowning triumph of our civilization.

Art, like nations, has its heroic history, its refined and manly history, its effeminate and sensuous history—the sure presage of national decay. Our art is just entering upon the first of these planes. Shall we allow it to be supplanted here in its young life by that of an effete and decayed race which in no way represents us? Our pride should revolt at the very idea. We should not forget so soon the homely manners and tastes of our ancestors, and the hardships they endured with undaunted hearts; but it should be our pride to welcome their venerated forms in these buildings and grounds, and surround them with the insignia of a nation's love and homage; and patriotic hearts should perform the noble work.

It is not enough that the artist select an American subject for his work. He must also be imbued with a high sense of the nature of the institutions of the country, and should have a certain assimilation with its habits and manners. He should be baptized, as it were, in the spirit of its nationality, or his labor, however well performed in an academic sense, will fail to meet a response from those for whom he toils. The Etruscan art is mainly interesting to us as a historic record of an otherwise lost nation; and the beautiful art of the Greeks derives its chief value from its nationality; and that of the Egyptians for a similar reason. It requires but little discrimination to perceive that were the arts of these different nations intermingled, they would lose their chief value—their individuality.

Are our portrait statues, in which the Greek or Roman costume has been substituted for that worn by the individuals represented, satisfactory? Do they not rather convey a feeling of shame for the paucity of invention on the part of the artist, and an acknowledgment that we have sought refuge in stuffs and draperies to conceal

our want of power in the expression of character? We want nothing thrown in between us and the facts of our history to estrange us from it. We want to be brought near it, to realize it as an existence, not as a myth. True genius presents us no nightmares, no vagaries; but is clear-seeing, and by its subtleness of perception and power of expression renders truth palpable to duller senses.

We are shown in the Capitol a room in the style of the "Loggia of Raphael;" another in that of Pompeii; a third after the manner of the Baths of Titus; and even in the rooms where American subjects have been attempted, they are so foreign in treatment, so overlaid and subordinated by symbols and impertinent ornaments, that we hardly recognize them. Our chief delight in this survey is in a few nicely painted animals and American birds and plants, in some of the lower halls; and even here one familiar with foreign art sees constantly intermingled the misapplied symbols of a past mythology, but wanting in the exquisite execution and significance of the originals.

In preparing a plan for the decoration of the Capitol, the commissioners do not recommend its immediate completion, or that its accomplishment should be hastened; for this would not only be injustice to those who come after us, but would necessitate the employment of talents which require thorough training for this particular work. The execution of these decorations must necessarily extend over a long space of time, and be subject to the will of Congress from year to year. It is, therefore, of the first importance to establish a system which can be pursued deliberately as the buildings may advance toward completion, and thus secure a harmony and adaption where otherwise confusion would be the inevitable result. The elaboration of such a system will require great care, study, and consultation, and could not well be embraced within the limits of this report. We therefore suggest it in general terms.

The rotunda, taken as a point of departure, claims the first attention in laying down this system. In the dome there will be large spaces for the introduction of pictures, which may be devoted to subjects immediately relating to the discovery of the country—the Embarkation and Landing of Columbus, and the subsequent discoveries of Ponce de Leon and De Soto. Under the great cornice which surrounds the rotundo, there is in the plan of the architect a frieze in bas-relief, which may embrace the idea of Freedom, civil and religious.

In the rotunda, below this frieze, may with propriety be represented the colonial history of the country, followed by that of the revolution; and from the rotunda towards the halls of the Senate and the House of Representatives, such other successive epochs of our history as would enable a person with ordinary intelligence to read it consecutively.

Next in order comes the legislative history of the nation and the several States, which may properly be represented in the halls of Congress, and it would doubtless add greatly to the dignity of those halls to introduce on either side of the desk of the Vice President an appropriate statue or bust, for example, of the first Vice Presidents, Adams and Jefferson; and on either side of the desk of the Speaker of the House a similar one of an eminent member of that body during the the administration of Washington; for example, James Madison and

Fisher Ames. It is the opinion of the commissioners that far greater sobriety should be given to these halls in their general effect to render them less distracting to the eye.

Few are aware how disturbing to thought the display of gaudy, inharmonious color can be made. Hence its adoption for military uses—as in showy uniforms, painted banners, bright plumes, and scarlet coats—for dramatic and scenic effects, and for all purposes where it is desired to address the senses instead of the intellect. This very quality renders it unsuited to the halls of deliberation, where calm thought and unimpassioned reason are supposed to preside. Great richness of effect may be obtained, and is, perhaps, only to be obtained, by a true sense of the subordination of inferior parts. It is believed that this criticism will hold true in regard to all efforts of the mind. It is always observable in nature, and underlies her universal laws. Color is subject to these laws as well as everything in nature. Bright colors are sparingly distributed throughout the natural world. The white, red, blue, and yellow blossoms of plants, shrubs, and trees are not over prominent even in their season of bloom; while the main masses are made up of cool greens, grays, drabs and browns intermingled, and are always harmonious and agreeable.

In regard to the four great stairways, it is not thought advisable to recommend their permanent decoration at this time, but merely to paint them in simple colors. None but pictures of the highest order should be admitted to places of such prominence. To acquire these, not only time, but the utmost care and deliberation are requisite. There can be no doubt of the ability of our artists to perform this work, but time should be given them for preparation, both in fresco and in oil. Heretofore they have been engaged, with few exceptions, on easel pictures, and it is impossible at once for them to adopt the style required in works of such magnitude. It is said that Horace Vernet has been offered one of these spaces to fill; and it is readily conceded how valuable would be the acquisition of a work from such a master for a national gallery or the Executive Mansion. But there is no evidence of his acceptance of the commission, whether from the pressure of other engagements, or from the probable conviction that every foreigner who respects his art and his own reputation must feel his incompetency to paint the history of any country but his own. Vernet's studies have been from French life and manners, and his works consequently, are thoroughly imbued with his nationality, which constitutes in fact one of their great merits. It is morally impossible that he should wholly adapt his style or form of expression to ours. The expediency therefore, of inviting even the most distinguished foreign artist to paint on the walls of the Capitol may well be questioned. The British government requires that a foreigner shall have resided at least ten years in the country before he shall even be allowed to compete for any government work. Experience has taught them the necessity of adopting this rule, and it is deemed proper that we should profit by their experience rather than purchase it for ourselves.

The rooms formerly occupied by the Senate have been assigned to the Supreme Court, and may appropriately be decorated with subjects

relating to the judicial history of the country. Subjects connected with valuable discoveries and inventions are well adapted for the decoration of the long corridors leading from the rotunda to the halls of legislation. The lobbies of the Senate and the House of Representatives afford ample space for portraying incidents in pioneer life, and other scenes, illustrating the manners and habits of different sections of the country.

The various committee rooms of both houses will, from the purpose to which they are severally applied, naturally suggest their mode of decoration.

All passages which, from their situation, cannot be well lighted should be painted simply in flat colors, with such slight ornaments as will render them light and cheerful; more than this would be inappropriate. Color should be so arranged as not to add to their obscurity, as in the present instance. In all places where stucco ornaments are exposed to constant mutilation, it is deemed useless to waste money in painting in any other than the simplest modes, as works of art would very soon be rendered worthless and unsightly in situations where every little breakage or abrasion would expose the plaster underneath. And the commissioners notice with some surprise that no provision has been made for the protection of the numerous plaster angles which occur throughout the halls and lobbies of both wings of the Capitol extension. This oversight is the more extraordinary when they find expensive painting and gilding, as in some of the lower halls and in the ante-room of the Senate, where mutilations have already taken place. Ornamentation in stucco is not properly employed where permanence is desirable. Its meretricious character renders it better suited to temporary purposes, where the employment of wood or bronze would be too expensive. Throughout the building there is a redundancy of ornamentation, cheap and showy in some instances, and employed where ornament is not required; like the breaking up of large spaces into small ones, thus destroying the very repose which the eye instinctively seeks.

There are other instances equally incongruous, where expensive bronze ornaments are fastened upon wooden doorways and jambs, much to their detriment. If it were desirable to enrich the doorways leading to the galleries of the Senate and the House, it should be done by carving the ornaments in the same material of which the doors are made; thus forming a part of them, instead of their being detached and fastened on afterwards. This would have secured harmony. The bronze employed in the present instance, when seen at the distance of a few yards, upon a light ground, has the effect of so many unintelligible dark spots, incapable of light and shade in themselves, and consequently disturbing the general unity of the halls. Carving in wood is a legitimate mode of ornamentation, and is capable of being rendered rich and effective. Bronze and marble are no less so when properly applied; but castings from natural objects can never subserve this purpose, because they must always be brought in contact with modelled or mechanically wrought surfaces, with which, however beautiful in themselves, they have no affinity or relation. This is a principle in taste long since established, and a departure



from it is an acknowledgment of an inability to fulfil, or an ignorance of the legitimate requirements of art.

The commissioners feel no ordinary pleasure in referring to the works of Crawford and Rogers; for in them they recognize a nationality and a suitability to the purposes for which they were designed. The government is fortunate in the possession of so many of the works of the former of these artists, since it has pleased an All-wise Providence to arrest his brilliant career so early in life. It is gratifying to learn that a safe and permanent location has been provided for his models of the pediment, under the government. This act was due alike to art and his memory; for the models are the only real works of his hands in their possession, and as such will be objects of national interest, and may become a nucleus for a future school of art under the national patronage.

It having been determined to fill the pediments of the eastern porticos with statues, and the statues for one of them having already been executed here in marble, under the direction of the former superintendent, it would be proper to recommend an appropriation for the remaining pediment at any time; but as the progress of the building does not render it important at present, it is deemed advisable to defer it to another year. In connexion with this subject, however, the commissioners feel constrained to add that had it not have been decided to fill these pediments with statues they would have recommended *alto-relievi* for that purpose. Statues must always convey an idea of detachment, as something superadded; while *alto-relievi* form a part of the building, and consequently admit of a treatment more in harmony with it. Various grades of relief are proper in the same work, adding thereby great richness and variety of effect. There are instances, it is true, in which statues have been employed to fill pediments, as in the case of the Parthenon, whose porticos were supported by massive Doric columns; but in cases where the Corinthian order has been adopted, as in the United States Capitol extension, *alto-relievi* have almost universally been employed, and for reasons obvious to the intelligent observer.

Before leaving the subject of government requirements in respect to art, the commissioners feel constrained to suggest that in no department in which it has been employed is there a greater apparent deficiency than in that of the government coinage and die-sinking. In all that pertains to its mechanical execution our coinage will compare favorably with that of any nation. Our great deficiency is in an artistic sense, and we should evince an unconsciousness of the requirements of our position did we neglect to express the views of the artists of the nation on this subject, whom we represent.

The coins of nations have for many centuries been designed and have served to represent the theory and purpose of the life of such nations through the images and inscriptions with which they were embellished. This usage, as is well known, originated and corresponds with that of chiefs and rulers in respect to their seals or signets and arms of state. The embellishments of the coins of sovereignties being but duplications of their arms, "which sovereign States do constantly bear," should not only be designed in significant conformity to the meaning of such arms, but in the spirit and form of the highest art.

Otherwise these symbols of national characteristics lose their chief significance. Our coinage is essentially inferior to that of France, Russia, or Great Britain, in this respect. The commissioners are aware that government has expended considerable amounts in procuring designs and models, but unfortunately the skill of competent artists has not been called into requisition. It seems absurd to boast of distinguished artists and not to employ their talents in every department pertaining to their professions which the government may require. The commissioners feel it to be important that there should be harmony in the spirit and form in all departments of our national art, as a basis of all future developments in that direction. Art as employed in mere decoration has but little national importance, but as an expression of thought and intention it ranks with the highest efforts of the mind.

In expenditures of money for works of art it is important as a wise measure of economy that productions of sufficient merit should be secured to render their future removal or obliteration unnecessary. It is true that governments as well as individuals must purchase their experience in these as in all other matters; but it would seem that the system heretofore pursued in this particular, from its inadequacy to meet the requirements of the age and its falsity as an expression of our artistic development, had been already indulged in with sufficient liberality. Nations have been proud of noble works of art, and even when their power and splendor in other respects have departed, art has stood forth to remind them of their former greatness. For us to flaunt in the borrowed and fragmentary arts of another country, is like the Indian who abandons his native wild dignity and forest dress, and struts through the streets of a city in a cast-off military uniform.

It is believed that the true method of procuring designs for statuary and paintings, as a general principle, is to invite liberal competition, with such regulations as shall secure to every artist an impartial and unbiassed adjudication of his work; but the well-known repugnance of artists of the first rank, who have achieved a national reputation, to compete with each other, would render this a doubtful policy to pursue with them. It is therefore deemed but respectful and proper to award to such artists commissions for works for which their talents and acquirements have fitted them. The commissioners are sustained in this position by the experience and practice of all nations in similar cases.

In the erection of statues, monuments, and fountains in the public grounds, the same system of subordination should be observed which is contemplated in the distribution of works of art in the public buildings. They should be arranged, so far as practicable, in harmony with the plan of the grounds. But, as the more important of these parks are yet to be planned, a mere suggestion in regard to them will be sufficient for the present. When Congress shall have made appropriations for their final arrangement and completion, landscape gardeners should be invited to submit designs for that purpose.

As the two halls of Congress and other portions of the building are now ready for the reception of works of art, the commissioners recommend the commencement of their decoration. For this purpose an

appropriation will be necessary ; the estimate for which will be found in a note appended to this report.

The commissioners finding their functions and powers not sufficiently defined by the acts of Congress of 1858 and 1859, to enable them to perform the duties contemplated in their appointment, would respectfully urge upon the attention of Congress the necessity of such further legislation as shall render the commission efficient and useful to the government ; which they believe can best be effected by clothing them with the authority recommended by the artists of the United States, in the following extract from their memorial to Congress in 1858: "Your memorialists respectfully urge that the great end proposed, viz: 'the advancement of art in the United States,' may be most surely and completely attained by the establishment of an art commission, composed of those designated by the united voice of American artists as competent to the office; who shall be accepted as the exponents of the authority and influence of American art; who shall be the channels for the distribution of all appropriations to be made by Congress for art purposes, and who shall secure to artists an intelligent and unbiased adjudication upon the designs they may present for the embellishment of the national buildings."

HENRY K. BROWN.  
JAMES R. LAMBDIN.  
JOHN F. KENSETT.

The PRESIDENT, of the United States.

#### NOTE.

*Estimates of appropriations required to carry out the recommendation of the foregoing report.*

For eight pictures to fill four panels in each of the halls of Congress.....	\$40,000
For four statues for Senate retiring room.....	20,000
For two statues for eastern front door of south wing.....	5,400
For two colossal busts for Senate chamber.....	3,000
For two statues for House of Representatives.....	10,000
For painting Speaker's room..	2,000
For painting private stairways and passages behind Speaker's chair .....	7,500
For painting room east of Speaker's room.....	2,000
For painting Post Office, south wing.....	4,000
For modelling valves for two eastern doorways.....	12,000
For casting and chasing the same in bronze, (original estimate) .....	16,000
For commencing the decoration of lobbies and halls of both wings of Capitol extension and designs for the same .....	20,000
For casting statue of Freedom for new dome.....	15,000
For painting ante-room of Senate.....	10,000
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	166,900
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